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DEPARTMENT FOR G/IWI AND AF/E - JWYSHAM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KWMN](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA'S NOMINATION: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE 2009

REF: STATE 99729

1. (U) Embassy Addis Ababa would like to nominate Ms. Birtukan Midekssa Deme, Chairperson, Unity for Democracy and Justice Party, as our nominee for the 2009 Secretary's Award for International Women of Courage. The remainder of this cable is tracked to nomination detail criteria outlined in reftel.

2. (U) Nomination Details:

Full Legal Name of Nominee: Birtukan Midekssa Deme. (Note: Ethiopians are given a single first name. Their second and third names are their father's and paternal grandfather's first names respectively. For passport purposes, the grandfather's name "Deme" is used as the surname, but for all other purposes women go by the Amharic equivalent of "Mrs" followed by their first name, i.e. Woizero Birtukan. End Note.)

Job Title: Chairperson, Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) Party.

Date of Birth: April 27, 1974

Country of Birth: Ethiopia

Citizenship: Ethiopian

Address, Telephone, and E-mail:

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

+251-911-406-739

BIRTUKANMIDEKSSA@YAHOO.COM

(Note: Addis Ababa does not have a standard street addressing convention, hence the vagueness of the address).

Passport Number: EP0374810

Confirmation of Notification: Post confirms that we have discussed this nomination with the nominee, and she has confirmed her appreciation for, and concurrence with, our intention to nominate her.

3. (U) Justification for Award:

Birtukan Midekssa has shattered the Ethiopian political system's glass ceiling becoming the first woman to lead a political party in the country's more than 3,000 year documented history. Despite a challenging political environment and having been the personal target of prominent persecution, Birtukan has not only made history for the role of women in politics, but has fundamentally altered Ethiopia's political landscape by establishing the country's first truly national political party.

Soon after graduating with honors from law school, Birtukan Midekssa was appointed as a judge in Ethiopia's High Court in her early 20s. From her position on the bench, Birtukan personally observed the lack of judicial independence and strong-handed efforts by the Ethiopian Government (GoE) to influence the courts. Unable to change this dynamic from within, Birtukan forewent the job

security of lifetime tenure to become active in the political opposition joining Rainbow Ethiopia - Movement for Democracy and Social Justice. Birtukan quickly rose within the party, assuming a position as Vice-Chair, and winning a seat in Parliament in the tumultuous May 2005 national elections.

After months of legal challenges by Rainbow and its Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) partners to contest the election results, on November 1, 2005 Ethiopian police detained Birtukan and over 100 senior opposition leaders. After seven weeks of being held without charge in violation of the constitution, the GoE finally charged Birtukan and her colleagues with seven capital offenses, including Treason and Genocide, which Post and Ethiopia-watchers broadly consider having been politically motivated. With a one-year old daughter at home, Birtukan spent the next 19 months in prison. When the GoE offered to release her and her colleagues if they signed a statement acknowledging that they had violated the constitution, former judge Birtukan refused to so taint her reputation and integrity. On June 11, 2007 an Ethiopian court convicted Birtukan of "Outrages Against the Constitution" and several other offenses and on July 16, it sentenced her to life in prison. In late July, Ethiopian elders helped secure a GoE pardon, and release, for Birtukan and the others.

After being released, internal rifts within the former CUD emerged, but the bulk of its key leaders who remained politically active established the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party. Despite facing persistent GoE harassment personally and among her supporters, Birtukan remained committed to forming a strong opposition party. Recognizing the inherent weakness of Ethiopian political parties which are uniformly oriented toward an individual leader or ethnic group, Birtukan struggled successfully among early

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UDJ supporters to ensure that the party is truly national in complexion, leadership, and support. On June 18, 2008, UDJ held its founding general assembly with delegations from Oromiya, Amhara, and Southern Nations regions, as well as from ruling-party dominated Tigray, and largely neglected Afar, Gambella, and Somali regions. Birtukan's strong credentials, dynamic vision, and persuasive rhetoric convinced the founding members to elect her as the first woman to lead an Ethiopian political party.

The introduction of robust democratic practices and institutions is a fundamental objective of the United States. The emergence of a dynamic and competent political opposition is fundamental to achieving that goal. As a strong political leader, an accomplished professional, and an individual willing to face personal adversity rather than compromise her integrity, Birtukan Midekssa is a role model for all Ethiopians. Recognizing her with the Secretary's Award for International Women of Courage would only confirm the status which she has already earned.

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